



Road to Success: Tales of great schools

A roadmap of MinnCAN's statewide
Road to Success tour and lessons from
changing-the-odds schools

A MINNCAN REPORT



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This report was published
in February 2014 by MinnCAN:
The Minnesota Campaign for
Achievement Now

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Introduction

In the 19th century, our country created its first public schools. In the 20th century, we created enough schools to serve every child. In the 21st century, we have the obligation to ensure that every U.S. child has access to world-leading public schools.

It's a big charge for our country—and for Minnesota. Simply put, many Minnesota kids who most need a great public education are not getting one; our achievement gaps and graduation rates trail the nation.

Yet our state is also home to the very traits that give rise to meaningful change: civic engagement, voter turnout and pride in public services. Furthermore, we've recently made some notable advances in public education. From increasing access to high-quality pre-K for our youngest learners to helping advance the teaching profession through educator evaluations, we have much to be proud of.

With the help of research, smart policies and 10,000 member activists who are part of the MinnCAN movement, we can build upon that momentum to achieve great public schools for all.

That work begins with unearthing strategies from schools already beating the odds.

In fall 2013, that's exactly what MinnCAN set out to do. We toured 19 communities across the North Star State to see highly effective educators at work in some of Minnesota's most successful schools, and to learn from educators and community leaders what needs to change at the capitol if we're serious about improving public education.

To choose what communities to visit, we consulted 2012 MCA data to see which schools were making the greatest strides for underserved and marginalized kids. (Although these test scores represent only one measure of effectiveness, they proved a valuable starting point.)

All in all, we visited 28 schools and 47 classrooms. At each stop, we engaged with teachers, school and district leaders, parents and, in many cases, community institutions, such as local chambers of commerce, rotaries, foundations and United Ways. Nearly all of these groups expressed eagerness to connect in-person, making for long and fruitful days. Our visits were refreshing, too: the interactions and conversations we observed were candid, civil, collaborative, solution-oriented, grounded in research and best practice—unlike the toxic discourse around education often found in the metro.

And every conversation was deeply focused on kids.

We ended the trip physically exhausted, ideologically recharged and equipped with dozens of ideas for our state policymakers. It's time to

make our achievement gaps and lagging graduation rates inequalities of the past, and put more great schools on Minnesota's map.

Here at MinnCAN, we're on a mission to once again make Minnesota the nexus of world-class public education. Because great schools change everything.

Warmly,



Daniel Sellers
MinnCAN Executive Director



Nicholas Banovetz
MinnCAN Deputy Director

Themes

The systems and strategies in place in the schools we visited were similar across the communities that encompassed Road to Success

Overlapping observations from the great schools we visited:

Community conversations are positive and student-focused.

Schools hold exceptionally high standards for all students.

Across-the-board high-quality, Parent Aware-rated pre-K (typically all day, every day) is a critical lever to closing gaps and improving third-grade reading proficiency.

Adoption of data-driven instruction and real-time assessments to effectively track kids across the pre-K—12 continuum; use of student achievement data to foster deeper parent engagement.

Educator evaluations are common practice and have been for years—and most evaluation models consist of multiple measures of effectiveness.

Early and immediate interventions for struggling students.

Plentiful enrichment opportunities for advanced students.

When appropriate, effectively mainstreaming special education students.

New-to-country, non-native English speaking students can excel in English reading when held to appropriately high expectations.

Professional Learning Communities, or PLCs, are instrumental when principals and teachers use them as a means to infuse their school with more collaboration and innovation.

Schools can beat the odds, but it requires community-wide buy-in and mindset shifts—starting with teachers is a must.

These are the changes that educators said they need to continue beating the odds:

Flexibility in meeting state standards, including allowing some vocational and technical courses to count toward math and science requirements. Schools and districts in Greater Minnesota consistently cited this as a key lever for increasing graduation rates and ensuring students are ready to enter the workforce.

The state needs to stop “moving the goal posts” on how it measures student achievement. Changing standards and assessments every few years is frustrating and confusing for students, teachers and families.

More opportunities to expose new-to-country, at-risk and middle-achieving students to rigor, such as challenging programs and post-secondary curriculum. Schools find students are more likely to graduate and continue their education with these practices.

Align the new state teacher evaluation model with meaningful teacher professional development. Teachers and principals hold professional evaluations in high regard.

Guidance on data-driven instruction, including best practices for using student achievement data to improve teaching and learning. Many schools developed their own practices in isolation, but want to know if they're on the right track.

Stronger assessments and reforms to MCAs so they work better for teachers, parents and school leaders—for example, tests that are timely, show student growth and standards mastery, and track kids and subgroups across the continuum for several years.

Reformed hiring practices—schools want to hire from broader, more diverse talent pools and see alternative teacher certification as a key strategy.

Opportunities to engage in policy and practice reforms in meaningful ways. Outstate communities don't always feel invited to share their ideas on best practices and ideas for improvement.

Less onerous teacher licensure requirements, including expanding alternative licensure programs.

Flexibility in spending resources at the school level. If schools meet student achievement goals, they want more freedom and local control over how they spend education dollars—ensuring they can best meet the needs of their kids.

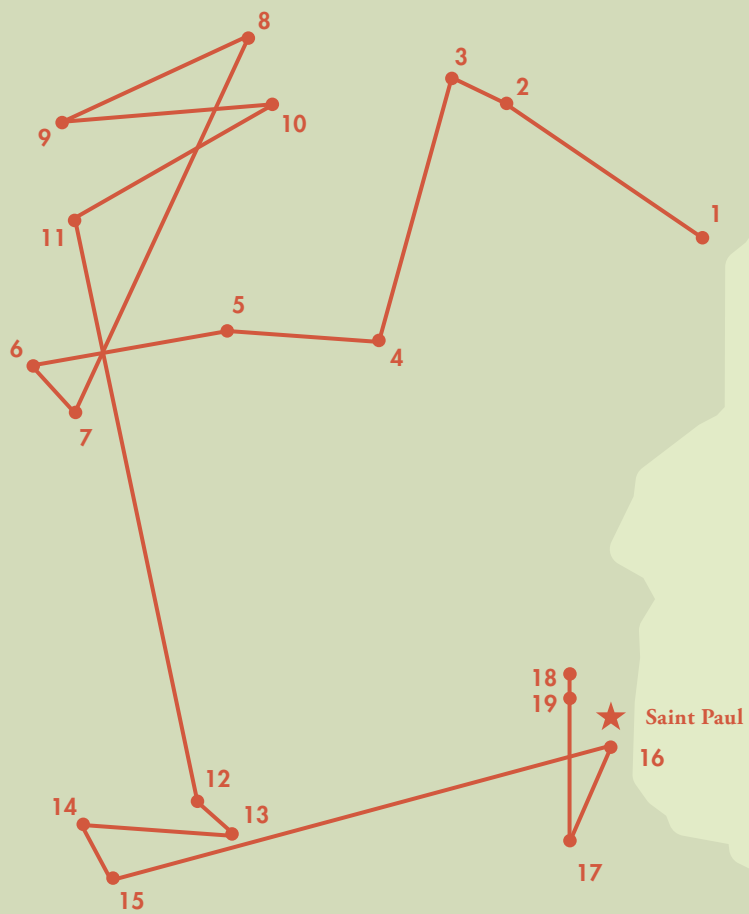
How we define high-school graduation rates. Because of student demographic differences (e.g. ELL, mobility), we should not be stuck on four-year rates; rather, consider other rates among subgroups a success—even if it takes longer.

A richer, more accurate definition of what “college and career readiness” means for educators, and what local employers are looking for in the workforce. More learning time should be dedicated to teaching students technical and soft skills, and more students should have access to post-secondary education options while still in high school.

Attracting more high-quality teachers to Greater Minnesota.

RTS TOUR

ACROSS THE STATE



Throughout the tour, we noticed some consistent themes, strategies and challenges. But we also found that each school we visited is incredibly unique, and were blown away by the dedication and innovation within these communities. For more detailed information on each Road to Success stop—the people we met, the initiatives we admired, the lingering challenges we identified and more—please read on:

Next steps

In November 2013 we released the ‘Native American Student Achievement in Minnesota’ report. MinnCAN engaged with Native Americans and, as part of our Road to Success tour, visited schools that are achieving great results for Native students. These conversations contributed to the report, which profiles success stories and is available at www.minncan.org/research/native-american-student-achievement-minnesota.

We continue to share the stories of great schools with news media and at the capitol. Our progress to-date includes nearly 50 media stories highlighting school success stories, including The Bemdji Pioneer, the Detroit Lakes Tribune, Northfield News and the Duluth News Tribune. Help us share more stories on schools that are posting strong student success.

Look for opportunities to help us bring themes and best practices from the schools we visited to the State Capitol. Visit www.minncan.org and engage with us at www.minncan.org/join.

We’ll do this again! Check back on our website to see where we’re going in 2014!

Media mentions:

The Bemdji Pioneer

State education group MinnCAN tours area for feedback on what’s working well, where to improve.
Sept. 26, 2013

the Detroit Lakes Tribune

State studies Native pupils’ success in DL.
Sept. 29, 2013

Northfield News

Northfield Middle, High Schools see improvement in student growth
Oct. 5, 2013

The Duluth News Tribune

School gets high marks for American Indian achievement
Dec. 22, 2013

Appendix: Notes from the field

1. CLOQUET

Churchill Elementary / Cloquet Public Schools

Not only is Cloquet the gateway to the Arrowhead, its schools are pioneering systemic improvements student outcomes—especially for Native students.

Cloquet schools administer meaningful assessments throughout the school year. Educators credit much of their success to devoting the first three weeks of the school year to diagnostic testing. Then, they have an in-service “data retreat” day where they map out the year for every student. They identify who’s on track and who’s not—and tailor instruction via their innovative intervention block schedule. This isn’t about absolute proficiency, their focus is on understanding diverse student needs and building stronger relationships with parents—especially in Native communities.

Teachers have bought into the new school philosophy. “Our entire building had to get behind this approach, our schedule and assessments. We’re very prescribed now on what needs to be done,” said Dave Wangen, the principal of Churchill Elementary.

School culture is strong. Phil Beadle, who leads Indian education for the school, emphasized, “Everyone is behind our approach, and that leads to success and strong culture. We promote high expectations and advance relationships—with students and parents.” Teachers share the school’s assessment tools with parents so that they understand how their kids are progressing over the academic year and how they’re advancing across the continuum—grades and disciplines. And the school’s block schedule has helped families appreciate the differentiated learning styles and needs of students.

Ken Scarbrough, Cloquet superintendent, noted “A lot of the credit has to go to students, supportive families, caring and hardworking teachers, and above all else, collaboration in the community. Essentially, we all do everything we can to make life better for our kids.” He highlighted the unique agreement between Cloquet schools and nearby tribal schools on the Fon du Lac Reservation as an example.

Top 10 Minnesota school rankings:

Churchill Elementary School, second for Native student performance among all elementary schools.

Washington Elementary School, sixth for Native student performance among all elementary schools.

Cloquet Middle School, fifth for Native student performance among all middle schools.

Cloquet Senior, sixth for Native student performance among all high schools.

2. GRAND RAPIDS

Reading and Math Academy / Grand Rapids Public Schools

We visited Robert J. Elkington Middle School in Grand Rapids, and had the opportunity to speak directly with students in their Reading and Math Academy (formerly Middle Area Learning Center). We were fortunate to be able to supplement the school visit with meetings with community stakeholder, business leaders and school board members.

There's strong leadership and a shared vision from superintendents and principals—and clear buy-in among school staff. Leaders have built a culture where students, families and teachers thrive.

The Reading and Math Academy is unique in that it's seamlessly integrated within the school. While some districts separate students in their “area learning center” from the general student population, leading to a feeling of stigmatization, the academy is viewed positively by students in the program who understand they're getting the help they need to be successful.

The culture of the entire school is rooted in high expectations for student success, developed only after the school “named the problem” by acknowledging that struggling students—many of whom are low-income—weren't getting the support they needed to achieve academically.

The time students spend in the Reading and Math Academy isn't used simply for homework help or re-teaching lessons; rather, teachers maintain an academic focus to ensure that interventions are meaningful.

The school focuses on identifying and hiring teachers they believe will be effective classroom leaders. The administration dedicates time and resources to professional development and commits to building buy-in among teachers for new programs—even if those changes are initially met with resistance.

Lastly, virtually every member of the community is on the same page on strategies to further strengthen public education—from teachers and administrators to businesses and community organizations.

3. DEER RIVER

King Elementary / ISD #317

An early-morning visit to King Elementary gave us the opportunity to meet with school administrators, board members, teachers and support staff. Half of the student population is nonwhite and 70 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Top 10 Minnesota school rankings:

Reading and Math Academy, second for performance gains among all middle schools.

Grand Rapids Senior High School, fourth for Native student performance among all high schools.

Top 10 Minnesota school rankings:

King Elementary School, third for Native student performance among all elementary schools.

The school releases students early every Wednesday so teachers can look at student achievement data as part of professional learning communities—regularly examining the results of formative assessments is critical to meeting individual student needs. Principal Amy Galatz said of these weekly meetings: “We realized teachers needed to be circling back and looking at student data far more often than they were.”

The district effectively communicated to parents the decision to release students early one day a week by proactively highlighting the positive impact it would have on student learning.

The school points to one specific program as key to their success: Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports, also known as Response-to-Intervention. Educators continually highlighted the program as leading to better relationships between students, teachers and parents. The Minnesota Department of Education recently recognized the school as an exemplar Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports school.

The school hasn’t shied away from new, higher academic state standards. When the new standards were set, the staff worked tirelessly to raise the rigor in their classrooms to ensure that students could succeed; however, administrators and staff are clear that the standards can’t keep changing every few years. As one teacher said, “We need to stop moving the goal posts.”

4. BRAINERD

Minnesota American Indian Education Summit /
Brainerd Public Schools

The Indian education summit is the second annual convening to address Native American education issues in Minnesota, from best practices currently being used by schools and districts to data use and partnerships that can benefit Indian students.

The biggest theme from the summit was summed up by Dennis Olson, director of Indian education at the Minnesota Department of Education: “We have a state of emergency for education of Indian students in Minnesota, and we need everyone—students, teachers, tribal leaders and non-native Minnesotans—to be part of the solution.”

We must honor treaty and legal obligations and fulfill trust responsibilities for Native education.

All students (not just Native Americans)—as well as organizations and educators who interact with Native students and their families—need to learn about Native histories, languages, cultures and governments.



While in Brainerd MinnCAN attended the Minnesota American Indian Education Summit. Pictured here is Nicholas Banoretz connecting with staff from the Minnesota Historical Society.

For our visit in Brainerd, the local Chamber convened 10 community leaders, ranging from the superintendent of Brainerd schools to the vice-chair of Gov. Dayton's Workforce Development Council. We also met with Jennifer Smith, who leads the United Way of Crow Wing and Southern Cass Counties.

Brainerd has recently taken significant steps to better align school-community-business efforts to strengthen their schools.

The local United Way provides critical services and programs to communities in the area, which are faced with above average poverty rates. For example, the United Way supplies any willing low-income family with young children age-appropriate books every month. As a result, 1,700 kids access new books, and early education through first-grade teachers have a good handle on what kids are reading at home.

5. VERNDALE

Verndale Secondary School / Verndale Public School District

We spent an afternoon with Tom Riitters, the principal of Verndale Secondary School, who spoke at length about how Verndale is rethinking how they prepare students for college and careers.

To better prepare students for college and the work force, Verndale is returning to old ways of giving students access to vocational classes. With heightened math and science standards, Verndale achieves much of this

Top 10 Minnesota school rankings:

Verndale Secondary School, eighth for low-income student performance among all middle schools.

through independent study projects. Without these—and hands-on, experience learning—Tom believes Verndale’s graduation rate and students would suffer.

Verndale has made pre-K access a chief strategy (even before the days of Race to the Top and MinneMinds) to achieve strong student outcomes in elementary school, including third grade reading proficiency.

6. FERGUS FALLS

Prairie Wetlands Learning Center / Fergus Falls Public Schools

In Fergus Falls, we visited with public school educators and administrators, local employers, the mayor and a variety of other community leaders.

At the Prairie Wetlands center—a unique partnership between the schools, the city and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—fourth- and fifth-grade students experience math and science in the prairie fields for about one-third of their school day, every day. At the center, which is off school grounds, teachers promote participatory, experiential and hands-on learning.

During a meeting with the mayor, superintendent and several community leaders, we discussed what’s working well for area public schools and how state policy might better support public education. Ideas ranged from solidifying a richer definition of college and career readiness, granting schools flexibility on how they spend resources and attracting high-caliber teacher candidates to outstate Minnesota.

Otter Tail Power, a large regional employer, is advocating for better career training in schools. Mark Helland, who leads customer relations for the company, explained that 70 percent of area jobs don’t require a four-year post-secondary degree, and argued that “including engineering, accounting and technical skill training in high school will lend to a better-equipped emerging workforce.”

7. ASHBY

Ashby Secondary School / Ashby Public School District

In Ashby, we met with the principal, other school leaders and a handful of middle and high school teachers—and witnessed incredible coordination amongst all educators to make sure students succeed.

**Top 10 Minnesota
school rankings:**

Ashby Secondary School, first
for performance gains among
all middle schools.

Ashby attributes the school's success to a focus on individual student learning. The principal, Shane Tappe, explained, "This has been made possible via the school board giving teachers more flexibility and resources to collaborate on interventions and differentiated learning, better review and analysis of assessment data, scaling up pre-K programs, and adopting a culture of no excuses for student achievement."

Because the school is small, Ashby teachers engage with and track students across the continuum well because they work with them for consecutive years—lending to effective interventions and individualized enrichment.

Ashby educators requested more flexibility to meet state standards, including allowing vocational and technical coursework to count toward state math and science graduation requirements.

8. BEMIDJI

Central Elementary School / Bemidji Area Schools

We met with Pat Welte, the school principal, and a dozen-plus district educators. Central is faced with some of the highest free and reduced lunch rates in Minnesota; Tanya Hasbargen, who leads the Bemidji United Way, described poverty as something "embedded into their community."

School board members are ready for Minnesota to remove politics out of testing and to seek stronger, more objective ways to assess students. Teachers also shared that they hear next to nothing on how charter schools are doing, and they want to learn about their tried-and-tested practices.

Kathy Palm, the district assessment coordinator, stressed that we shouldn't limit graduation to a four-year mindset. Many kids finish, but it takes extra time because of a learning disability, new-to-country status or mobility issues. Their graduating should factor into our district performance.

Bemidji's integrated strategies to support kids of all backgrounds lend to them operating one of the largest bus routes in the state.

Beyond Central, the community members are advocating for more enrichment in the schools, increasing literacy rates and developing workforce talent locally—not just attracting new people to the region.

Top 10 Minnesota school rankings:

Central Elementary School, fourth for Native student performance among all elementary schools.

Bemidji Middle School, third for Native student performance among all middle schools.

Bemidji Senior Lumberjack Area Learning Center, fourth for Native student performance among all high schools.

9. WAUBUN

Waubun Secondary School / Waubun-Ogema-White Earth
Public School District

In Waubun—a rural town near the White Earth Indian Reservation—we met with remarkable educators who have made tremendous progress in turning their school around.

The proof of Waubun’s success?

1. The curriculum that teachers used with seniors five years ago is now taught in the ninth grade.
2. The school experienced a 20 percent gain in MCA scores from 2011 to 2012.
3. Their graduation rate is above 90 percent.

Charlene Gillis, the school’s assessment coordinator, emphasized that much of the credit points back to a “stretch culture” of rigor that they adopted a few years ago. Serving 70 percent Native students and 75 percent free and reduced lunch students, Waubun was traditionally falling short of state averages and was determined to do better.

The school now has a culture that uses and celebrates data: teachers practice differentiated instruction, and assess individual student potential—via STAR, or Standardized Testing and Reporting—three times a year to track progress. Data lent to refining an independent study program, where students receive up to six more hours of instruction a week, as well as its accelerated math and reading programs.

They changed their approach to teacher training. For example, the school identified room for improvement in student writing, so they helped teachers access professional development on how to coach writing—no matter their subject area.

Educators praised where Minnesota is headed with teacher evaluations. Charlene emphasized, “Accountability brings stability for our kids.” Related to accountability, she said “We need a stronger accountability system that doesn’t always judge students against white, affluent peers—that’s often degrading for our kids.”

Top 10 Minnesota school rankings:

Ogema Elementary School,
fifth for Native student
performance among all
elementary schools.

Waubun Secondary School,
eighth for Native student
performance among all high
schools.

10. LAPORTE

Laporte Secondary Public School / Laporte Public School District

Laporte schools open enrolls students from across north central Minnesota, boasting enrollment that far surpasses the city's population of 111 people. There, we spent time with Laporte's secondary school principal, superintendent and school board chair. While the community is small, its impact on student achievement is immense—largely attributed to professional development driven by teacher observations and adopting school-wide strategies to achieve higher-order thinking among students so they master depth of subject knowledge.

Our hosts in Laporte attributed their unrivaled success with rural students to two things: high expectations, and varied vocational classes to keep high school students engaged and on track for post-secondary education.

Kim Goodwin, the principal, was exceptionally dynamic in articulating a strategy for her school—and then walking us through strategies to achieve student success. She emphasized giving her teachers the flexibility to do what they do best—teach.

We witnessed classrooms where teachers have independently developed learning stations to accommodate different learning styles and abilities amongst their students. In one room, a teacher applied differentiated instruction to five subsets of students at one time.

The school credits the Authentic Intellectual Work framework as raising the level of instructional rigor. The framework is a teacher-staff professional development initiative aimed at increasing student learning by engaging students in higher-order thinking through three specific strategies:

1. Ensuring students develop depth of subject knowledge;
2. Improve student-teacher and student-student communication by requiring students to explain and elaborate on their answers; and,
3. Ensuring that lessons are relevant to students and tied to value beyond school.

Teacher professional development is driven by colleague observations, which are focused on whether students use higher-order thinking skills and engage in substantive conversation.

Top 10 Minnesota school rankings:

Laporte Secondary School, third for low-income student performance among all high schools.



11. DETROIT LAKES

Detroit Lakes Middle School / Detroit Lakes Public Schools

In Detroit Lakes, we spoke with local teachers who serve in the fifth-poorest county in Minnesota (Becker) and are no strangers to reform.

For nine years, teachers have benefited from comprehensive professional evaluations that include three formative classroom observations a year, district-designed rubrics and peer reviews with formative feedback three times a year and summative feedback at year-end.

They achieved teacher-generated assessments that are aligned with individual student standard and learning targets.

They have a more refined, rigorous curriculum and don't allow kids to fail. This is made possible by teachers shifting to a culture of collaboration, perseverance and persistence, a community-wide mindset of high expectations for all kids, and student performance serving as a pillar component in curriculum.

Teachers use assessments nearly daily, which they refine through their Professional Learning Communities, and use students' real-time results to offer immediate intervention and enrichment, when needed.

Lastly it's obvious that educators and Native people have fostered rich collaborative relationships in Detroit Lakes. As a result, Native students are reaping the benefits from strong student success in the classroom to improving graduation rates.

Tara Mason (White Earth Ojibwe) and other native people connected with MinnCAN in Detroit Lakes. Mason has had several children attend Detroit Lakes public schools.

Top 10 Minnesota school rankings:

Roosevelt Elementary School, ninth for Native student performance among all elementary schools.

Detroit Lakes Middle School, first for Native student performance among all middle schools.

Detroit Lakes Senior High School, fifth for Native student performance among all high schools.

12. REDWOOD FALLS

Redwood Area School District

We had an informative visit with the superintendent of Redwood Falls schools, Rick Ellingworth.

Rick stressed that limitations with licensure are burdensome when staffing special education, science and world languages.

Principals and teachers seem well-prepared for soon-to-come teacher evaluations—and the district is lifting components of the new state model, but building in some local considerations that better fit their schedules, size and assessments (including teacher-generated assessments).

Redwood Falls is confused about the MinneMinds pre-K scholarship rollout, and like many schools we visited, would like clarity from the Minnesota Department of Education as to why that is and what they can do to position themselves for eligibility in the future.

13. MORGAN

Cedar Mountain Secondary School

Cedar Mountain initially piqued our interest with its particular accomplishments with Native American and low-income student achievement. We spent a few hours meeting with Jeremy Schultz, the principal, as well as classroom teachers.

Similar to other communities we visited, principals and teachers at Cedar Mountain are well prepared for soon-to-come statewide teacher evaluations, and will combine components of the new state model with some local accommodations.

Educators want flexibility as to how they meet science and math state standards; they also want more alignment between standards and assessments.

School leaders and early education teachers were unclear about pre-K scholarships (who's eligible, how the Minnesota Department of Education is going to ensure rollout, etc.).

Teachers are unrelenting in their efforts to foster collaboration among peer teachers that directly feeds into classroom instruction. Some of this comes from Professional Learning Communities, but other schools are taking it to the next level. For example, at Cedar Mountain, Jeremy has assigned two effective teachers (one senior, one junior) to serve as peer coaches—providing real-time feedback to their colleagues on a daily basis and identifying ways to bring math and reading instruction into other subject areas (e.g., social studies and geography).

Top 10 Minnesota school rankings:

Reede Gray Elementary School, seventh for Native student performance among all elementary schools.
Redwood Valley Middle School, second for Native student performance among all middle schools.

Top 10 Minnesota school rankings:

Cedar Mountain Secondary School, ninth for low-income student performance among all middle schools.

14. MARSHALL

Marshall High School / Marshall Public School District

In Marshall, which is graded a highly desirable place to live by the United Nations and has an influx of new-to-country students entering its schools, we talked to educators and community leaders who are helping the southwest town navigate some very big changes.

Marshall schools are graduating new-to-country students from high school, but sometimes this means looking beyond the traditional four-year model to when students are fully ready for post-secondary opportunities.

Marshall Teachers want richer assessments. Klint Willert, the superintendent, shared, “Testing has been too simplistic for a complex enterprise, we need richer assessments.”

Educators also want more flexibility in teacher licensure (they want alternative teacher certification pathways and want to hire more teachers of color) and flexibility in how they meet high school standards so vocational classes can count.

Brian Jones, the school principal, emphasized that there’s a disconnect between teacher preparation programs and the subject areas in which schools need talent—especially for world language and business.

They heavily recruit kids of color to participate in extra-curricular activities so they experience a well-rounded education.

City-school-community education partnerships are critical to “fast-tracking” new-to-country residents (adults, too) and helping them join the community.

There’s a community-wide vision that high-quality education for all is an economic imperative. Pat Thomas, from the local adult basic education program, emphasized that business needs to have a seat at the table to help improve local education. Also, community leaders are calling for a regional vocational center.

15. TRACY

Tracy Secondary

Here lies a small town, open enrolling scores of kids. Surrounding communities in Southwest Minnesota have taken note of the school’s great work, particularly with special education kids and new-to-country students.

As a result of PLCs, Tracy schools have more continuity in instruction and started files on every student to better evaluate traction and targets across the continuum.

Top 10 Minnesota school rankings:

Marshall Middle School, 10th for English-language learners student performance among all middle schools.
Marshall High School, ninth for Latino student performance among all high schools.

Top 10 Minnesota school rankings:

Tracy Secondary School, second for English-language learners student performance among all high schools.



Paraprofessionals have been key, and much of their role is mainstreaming special education and new-to-country students.

In addition to AP classes, they have College Now programs where teachers use college curriculum in high school classes.

Active, formal writing is a strong ELL component so students solidify stronger reading and writing skills for life, education and jobs after high school.

16. COTTAGE GROVE

Cottage Grove Middle School / Pine Hill Elementary /
South Washington County School District

A culture of “How can I help?” instead of “You need to kick it up a notch” has enabled this suburban district to achieve high marks, particularly for its rising Asian student enrollment.

Cottage Grove schools are nimble and mindful on how to budget for student needs. For example, they doubled the number of ELL teachers in four years to meet changing demographics and use Q-Comp dollars to fund a data specialist at every building.

They don’t have assistant principals at elementary schools. Instead, according to Marsha Adou, a school board member, “we put the money where it makes the most difference for kids, such as having data and achievement specialists on staff.”

Daniel Selten engaged with students in Cottage Grove Middle School.

Top 10 Minnesota school rankings:

Pine Hill Elementary School, seventh for black student performance and English-language learners student performance among all elementary schools.

Cottage Grove Middle School, second for English-language learners student performance among all middle schools.

Olman Middle School, sixth for Latino student performance among all middle schools.

Woodbury Middle School, eighth for Asian student performance among all middle schools.

Lake Middle School, ninth for Asian student performance among all middle schools.

Woodbury Senior High School, fifth for Asian student performance among all high schools.

Park Senior High School, sixth for Asian student performance among all high schools.

Cottage Grove educators sustain a mindset that EL is not a deficit—it just requires modification to instruction (for all teachers, not just EL teachers). Educators have learned that many EL students in high school require enrichment, so they’re modifying rigor.

Teachers are willing to own the problem (i.e., math scores in 2012 were not what they wanted, so they’re driven to address that).

Schools have teacher assessments that include continuous feedback. For example, at Pine Hill Elementary, a teaching and learning professional observes teachers five times during the year and gives them feedback.

17. NORTHFIELD

Northfield Middle School / Northfield Senior High School /
Northfield Public Schools

We had to check out the schools in Northfield, where, among other impressive gains, the Latino high school graduation rate has increased from 36 to 92 percent in just 10 years.

Teachers and school leaders readily own a problem—then strategically address where they want to improve (e.g., stronger kindergarten readiness/pre-K, stronger achievement for kids of color and low-income kids).

High-quality pre-K is imperative (they fund nearly all seats via district funding and grants). Early education focuses heavily on language proficiency.

For English language learners, they employ a co-teaching “Team-Up” approach, where EL and content teachers formally collaborate and reduce student pullouts. This model also increases academic achievement, teacher awareness and understanding of EL students, and the number of positive interactions that EL families have with the school.

TORCH—an unrivaled program to accelerate achievement among struggling students and kids of color in the high school—provides students with the access to explore post-secondary opportunities, and support with applications and scholarships. Above all, the founders and coordinators of TORCH emphasized that they’ve established high expectations and aspirational goals for all students.

Top 10 Minnesota school rankings:

Northfield Middle School, seventh for Latino student performance and ninth for English-language learners among all middle schools.
Northfield Senior High School, seventh in the state for English-language learners student performance among all high schools.

18. MOUNDS VIEW & 19. NEW BRIGHTON

Mounds View Public Schools

In its jurisdiction is the first school in the country—Irondale High School—to focus associate's degree attainment for middle-achieving students. The entire district embodies high expectations for the culturally and socioeconomically diverse student body that it serves.

Mounds View runs its Early College Program on only \$55,000 a year, according to Superintendent Dan Hoverman.

Schools use common assessments in partnership with Anoka Ramsey Community College to ensure rigor and college and career readiness (some formative tests differ). They also have articulation agreements with higher education institutions so kids don't repeat courses, lending to a more seamless and affordable transition for students.

Mounds View schools rolled out a systematic curriculum redesign from elementary through high school by leveraging the ACT college and career readiness platform and then backwards mapping it from third grade and on.

Mounds View provides a clear plan for each student—across grade levels—and exercises a dean model to offer students appropriate rigor and continuing from grade-to-grade.

Top 10 Minnesota school rankings:

Turtle Lake Elementary School, fifth in Asian student performance among elementary schools.

Chippewa Middle School, fourth in Asian student performance among middle schools.

Mounds View Senior High School, second in Asian student performance among high schools.

Irondale High School, ninth in Asian student performance among high schools.

Join the conversation

Know of a great, beating-the-odds public school in Minnesota? Share that school—and why you believe it warrants attention—with us info@minncan.org.

If Minnesota is going to provide every child access to a great public school regardless of their address, it's critical that we recognize and learn from the very best schools already doing noteworthy work. Because great schools change everything.

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